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Changing of the guard at the CIA

In tapping William Casey to head the Central Intelligence Agency, President-elect Reagan is sending a clear signal to Congress, the American public, and overseas governments that US intelligence-gathering will be given increased priority by the new administration. Mr. Casey ran Mr. Reagan's successful election effort and is currently chairman of the transition committee. Moreover, the extent of that renewed mission for the CIA became apparent earlier this week when the GOP intelligence transition team proposed sweeping changes in the organization and operation of intelligence-gathering, including a call for an increase in covert action abroad.

We are not unmindful of the need to strengthen US intelligence capabilities, particularly through ensuring a careful balance between the human side of intelligence gathering and analysis, and the use of gadgetry and technology such as spy satellites and computers. But we would urge the new administration and Congress to be wary of any loosening of restrictions currently applied to covert actions. As Monitor correspondent Daniel Southerland pointed out in a series in these pages earlier this fall, there is a great need for US intelligence work to be fitted once again into a clearer sense of national foreign policy priorities. That means a greater emphasis must be placed on understanding the many cultural and political changes sweeping the world, with a need for recruiting thoughtful, well-educated analysts into intelligence work. The years with a James Bond aura of manipulating governments and plotting as-

sassinations are now behind us.

What must be avoided is a return to the days of going for "quick action" cloak-and-dagger operations. Intelligence work, rather, must be made the handmaiden of a carefully defined US foreign policy.

That should not preclude a greater emphasis on counterintelligence. There is little doubt that terrorism and Soviet espionage are continuing threats to the US.

There is some question, however, whether having a national central records system, as proposed by the transition team, is the proper solution to better counterintelligence. As proposed, the recording system would maintain records not just on presumed overseas agents but also on dealings of those agents with American citizens. To many lawmakers, such a system comes close to a national police dossier on US citizens and would likely pose grave constitutional questions. In fact, we rather suspect that any such system — if ever put into place by the new administration — would quickly become embroiled in litigation from civil liberties groups. And that would defeat the ultimate purpose of having such a system in the first place, namely, increasing intelligence capabilities.

Legislative proposals to establish a separate clandestine agency, as now proposed by some lawmakers close to Mr. Reagan, also strike us as questionable.

Mr. Casey, because of his background as a lawyer, former head of the US Securities and Exchange Commission, and onetime official of the old Office of Strategic Services (OSS),

is particularly equipped to pose the careful, long-range policy questions that will be needed during the days ahead as the Reagan administration seeks to define the new direction for the CIA. Although some current CIA officials are reportedly concerned that Mr. Casey's views of intelligence are too rooted in the OSS "night parachute drop" mentality of the 1940s, his tenure as SEC chief indicated caution and deliberation. We would hope that the same qualities will come to the fore during his days at the CIA.

We think Mr. Casey might profitably consider ways of increasing a more competitive system of intelligence analysis, as proposed by the Republican Party transition team. Diversity of ideas and information is as important in intelligence gathering as in any other endeavor. We would also trust that Mr. Casey will continue the pursuit of technological innovation that has been one of the accomplishments of the CIA under its current director, Stansfield Turner.

Whatever else is done, we think a basic need is the strengthening of the entire US educational system. Will intelligence agencies down the road be able to find the cultured personnel they will so badly need in a society that has downplayed foreign languages in schools and shortchanged basic educational skills? The longer-range objectives — and problems — of US intelligence agencies must not be overlooked in any consideration of short-term solutions. Careful deliberation plus regard for the long-range need — these must be the main ingredients in planning for the new CIA.